WEB-WORK PLOT STRUCTURE

Illustrated by diagrams and including a discussion of methods employed by Harry Stephen Keeler in writing mystery stories.

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THE question is often asked: What is plot? Now a mere definition does not satisfy this query. The most convenient recipe for a plot that I know of is: A problem and its solution. But if we are to become adepts at creating plot, we must have a more graphic idea than this formula gives. We must have a *mental image* of plot, into which our story ideas will tend to pour themselves as into a mold.

Such a mental image is the more easily acquired if the student has something definite to visualize. If we can reduce so abstract a thing as plot to a picture or diagram, we may thereby at least aid in the formation of such molds. It will be here attempted to make visible to the eye and to analyze the type of story that represents plot in its extreme form—the "web-work" mystery plot.

The distinction between this type of plot and its antithesis, the simple narrative or "row-of-bricks" plot, is just what the name implies. Web-work is intricate. While the pattern as a whole is unified, the various strands weave in and out in bewildering complexity. The row-of-bricks plot may be graphically represented as follows:
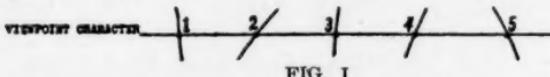

FIG. I

Each intersection of the line representing the progress of the central or viewpoint character is a person or other obstacle with which he has some kind of a conflict. A good example of such narration is *Pilgrim's Progress,* in which Christian, the central character, solves one problem after another, but in which none of the incidents bears a direct relation toward the others. They merely follow one another. One, or several, could be omitted with-

out detracting from the coherence of the whole. For example: Christian's encounter with the Giant Despair does not in the least bear upon his struggle in the Slough of Despond.

Gulliver's Travels furnishes another illustration of the row-of-bricks narrative. The various adventures of Gulliver have no connection with one another except that furnished by Gulliver himself. A further example of simple narrative is *Robinson Crusoe*. In all of these, the weaving in and out of characters and objects—web-work, in other words—is conspicuously absent. Hence, according to accepted standards, they are held to be examples of plotless narration.

Now let us take an example of construction a degree more complex.

FIG. II

In this graph, two characters are represented. A's first encounter with B (1) eventually results in a second encounter (2). Such a graph would cover broadly any simple plot involving two persons. For example: A administers a thrashing to B (1), for which later B revenges himself by pushing A off a railroad bridge (2). Or, to take a pleasanter example: A falls in love with Miss B (1) and, after going forth to seek his fortune, returns and induces her to marry him (2). Or, one or both of the strands might represent inanimate objects. Thus, A hits a punching bag, B (1), which rebounds and delivers a knockout to A (2).

This is web-work in its simplest form. The characters, once their lives have intersected, begin to weave. It should be noted that incident 2 definitely *results from* incident 1. Had it not been for the first encounter, the second would never have taken place. This phase of plot weaving must be clearly grasped, for it is the great essential. The earlier incidents must form the motive for, or the cause of, those that follow. If incident 1 did not furnish sufficient cause to bring about logically incident 2, an editor would say that the story lacked motivation, or that it lacked compulsion. In Figure III, encounter 1 brings about encounter 2; these together cause encounter 3, and so on.
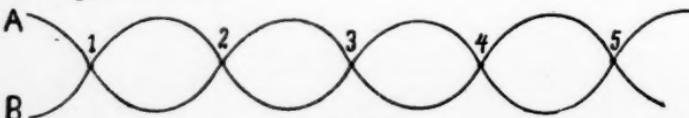

FIG. III
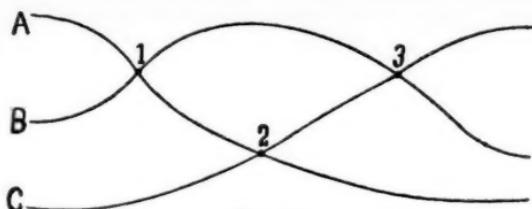
FIG. IV

Figure IV represents web-work somewhat more complicated. The encounter (1) between A and B results in an encounter (3) between B and C. Had it not been for the meeting of A and B, the paths of B and C would never have crossed. This graph would represent such an incident as the following: B administers a thrashing to A (1); A runs and tells his big brother C (2); and C, in turn, punishes B (3). Or, again: A falls in love with Miss B (1), and in his enthusiasm sings her praises to C (2), as a result of which C contrives a meeting with Miss B and "cuts out" (3) his incautious friend. Or, B throws a stone, represented by A (1); the stone hits a nest of wasps, represented by C (2); and the wasps promptly fly at B (3) with disastrous consequences.

The movement of balls on a billiard or pool table furnishes a graphic illustration of the laws underlying plot motivation.

When editors speak of plot in fiction they refer, as a rule, to web-work of some intricacy. A story is said to have very little plot if the web-work forms only simple loops such as are above illustrated. This, however, need not necessarily mean that the story lacks strength; a simple plot may be very strong. As a rule, intricacy of plot is confined to long stories rather than to short stories, and it is especially desirable in serials for magazine publication, where it furnishes what editors refer to as "serial quality."

Intricacy of plot is, however, merely one of the tools available for securing tensity of interest, and while this discussion will be limited to the employment of the one tool, it should not be forgotten that there are others, many of which belong to a higher order of literature.

Not every one can learn to write intricate plot or mystery stories, but it can do no writer harm to have knowledge of the technique of intricate plotting, for which a certain definite mental equipment is requisite, just as another sort of mental equipment is needed by one who would specialize in love stories or in stories of atmosphere, in poetry, or in sermons. For the writer of intricate-plot stories, mathematical ability and scientific precision of thought are desirable. A web-work plot must be "worked out," just as if it were a problem in algebra.
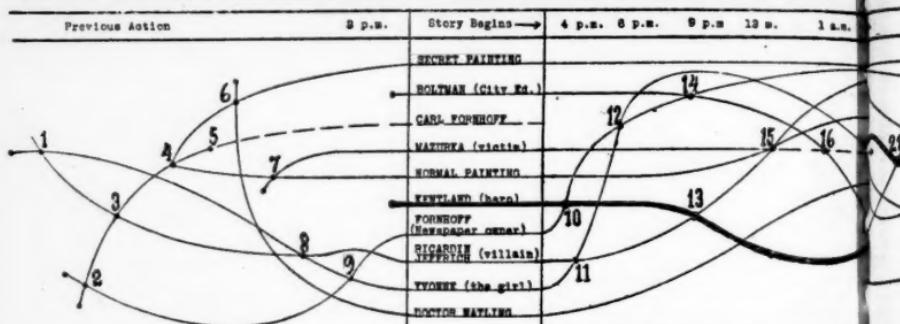
Fig. V—SYNOPSIS OF CRILLY STERY

1. Captain Ricardin, a French artillery officer, and his niece, Yvonne, live in Paris (some years before opening of story). Ricardin is disgraced and disappears.

2. Carl Fornhoff, an erratic revolutionary, breaks with his father, August Fornhoff, owner of the Chicago Morning Sun, and descends to mingling with soapbox orators and copying popular paintings for a living.

3. Captain Ricardin, living under an assumed name in Chicago, meets Carl Fornhoff. They devise a dynamiting plot.

4. Carl Fornhoff, knowing that he is suspected, paints two pictures of "The Man From Saturn." One is normal; the other conceals a map of location where dynamiting plans are hidden.

5. Carl Fornhoff suddenly dies; his studio effects are scattered.

6. Doctor Watling buys one of the pictures at auction. It happens to be the secret painting.

7. Abdul Mazurka, a Crilly Court curio dealer, buys the other picture at auction. It happens to be the normal painting.

8. Ricardin, discovering Yvonne in Chicago, compels her to enter a blackmailing scheme by threatening to use a letter incriminating her brother.

9. Yvonne, in order to secure the letter, carries Ricardin's message to Fornhoff, threatening exposure of Carl Fornhoff's dynamiting plans, unless a large sum is forthcoming.

A 10. (Beginning of story.) Fornhoff leaves Kentland (hero) in charge of newspaper on account of illness of night city editor.

11. Ricardin breaks to give letter incriminathher.

12. In retaliation, Yrnhoff mous letter the nam concealed in orings.

B 13. Jeffrich (assumecard Kentland an e he the Sun's mili

14. Fornhoff sends ght obtain paintinga, looking for the

15. (The crime.) Jeaurh and flees, aftefrom

16. Boltman discover ody, out Fornhoff's

17. Yvonne discovers dy, circumvent herating

C 18. (Beginning of my and mous news tipater from Boltman.

D 19. Kentland, follow n ta Yvonne near C nd s hospital.

E 20. Kentland has fou e the address of ling, other painting, ns ab

F 21. Kentland discoverbody lated painting.

G 22. Kentland finds Yzed at the hospital.

H 23. Kentland, curioupoctor dress as given then turning away ed o

To make this subject clear to readers, I have selected as a concrete example for analysis one of Harry Stephen Keeler's published web-work mystery stories.

Harry Stephen Keeler has definitely specialized in scientifically, or, if you will, mathematically built plots. He modestly disclaims any attempt to write "literature," though his characterizations are always vivid and clear-cut, and what may be termed literary art is by no means lacking in his yarns. His education included four years of intense grilling along higher mathematics at Armour Institute, which naturally helps him to combine his fiction situations into complex patterns. Judging from the general nature of

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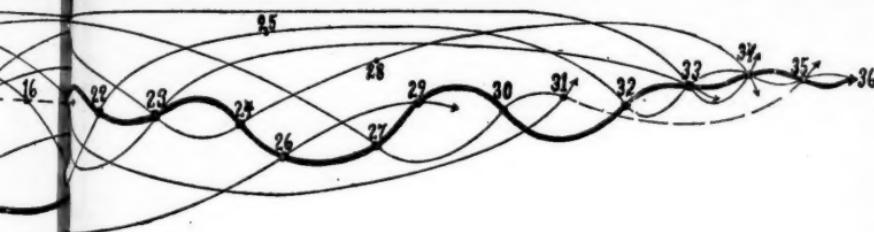
THRILLY MYSTERY AND KEY TO GRAPH

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I 24. Fornhoff discharges Kentland on a technicality, being secretly angry because Kentland secured a "scoop" story of the murder.

25. Yvonne recovers and departs from hospital, accidentally leaving a bracelet containing the name ". . . nne Ricardin" and a fancy comb.

J 26. Kentland secures typed recommendation for a new job from Boltman at his home.

K 27. Kentland visits Jeffrich, trying to learn something about the military scandal involving Ricardin.

28. Fornhoff collapses with a slight paralytic stroke and is taken home.

L 29. Kentland, discovering from similarity of typing with that of the recommendation that the anonymous news tip came from same typewriter, goes to Boltman and forces facts from him.

M 30. Jeffrich, having visited Boltman to tell him of Fornhoff's stroke, shadows Kentland, who is trying to locate purchaser of the fancy comb by visiting big department stores.

31. Jeffrich is killed, racing on a motorcycle to intercept Kentland and the face of stolen painting is found in his possession.

N 32. Kentland succeeds in locating Yvonne and she confesses all to him .

O 33. Kentland and Yvonne visit Doctor Watling's apartment and obtain the secret picture.

P 34. Kentland and Yvonne visit Fornhoff and, after uncovering the plans hidden in painting, destroy it in his presence.

Q 35. Kentland and Yvonne view Ricardin's dead body in morgue and discover that he and Jeffrich were identical. (This knits the web together.)

R 36. (Conventional ending.) Yvonne and Kentland united in a standard emotion.

his work, it would appear that his ambition is that the intricate plot shall reach its zenith through his efforts in the decade 1912 to 1922! Of this class of fiction his output in the last five years has amounted approximately to one million words, with sales of about 96 per cent of the total. He may therefore be presumed to know something about the building of plot and mystery stories.

The analysis of web-work as evidenced by a typical Keeler story may well be prefaced by his own statement of the philosophy and methods of such composition:

In the first place, why a web-work plot anyway? I offer the following explanation of it: Aside from interest in dramatic happenings, I believe that in every human being is a longing—an instinctive desire—to feel that life, in

its great complexity and utter harum-scarum manifestations, does move in a regulated manner; that it is not all incoherent, all mixed up and utterly without pattern, but that the whole thing is mathematically accurate in its causes and effects.

Now life, you will admit, though full of effects which are the direct result of causes, is apparently plotless. It is too complex. It is all mixed up; there is too much space, and too many character strands. There is hardly a sign of unified plot in life. But along comes a fictional web-work plot, real life artificially woven into a pattern mathematically and geometrically true, and it fills the gap in one's spirit which rebels at the looseness of life as it seems.

In fiction writing, I take it, our sole object is to entertain. To my mind, that is object enough. What greater function can a man exercise than to carry away others, chained to factory, office, mill, and household grind, to adventures, experiences, emotions, complications, which will never, never enter their own humdrum lives?

You and I have tried to dig up fiction and get at the philosophy underneath it. There is reason, system, method, philosophy, back of everything. You have thought upon and analyzed phases which I have stayed away from, because they were not strictly in my province. Your articles are splendid for that reason. I myself have thought, figured, analyzed, and delved into but one phase of the game: the phase of plot work, so far as it involved many threads—that complex form, "web-work," which word, so far as I know, is my invention, being coined as more nearly expressive than any other that I could devise.

In the building of a web-work story of large dimensions, the question arises: Should one aim for plot or for a dramatic, interesting story? I give this answer: The author should imagine himself with a nearsighted eye and a farsighted eye, each able to look in a different direction. The nearsighted eye should watch the developments and concentrate on building a set of interesting incidents—dramatic, of course, for the reader is going to follow the viewpoint character for a long time before the curtain lifts to show him the web-work plot back of it all. But all the time, the farsighted eye must be watching two things: First, will these developments help to weave a more complex structure? Second, will the structure thus far built help to provide interesting or surprising developments for the nearsighted eye to follow? There you have the big secret or trick of this kind of story-telling—the double watching.

Sometimes a new complication built into the story suggests a further entanglement of strands already created, or produces a new character—a new strand —which can be advantageously woven into the plot to help make further plot. Sometimes the web-work already built suggests a splendid complicating incident. Every time a change is made, some distortion of the whole structure takes place. The web-work is at first like a quivering sea of jelly. Every tap of the hammer makes it quiver dangerously, makes a dozen changes necessary. But gradually, as the story is developed, it gets more and more stable, till finally it is as near perfect as it can be made.

Now a question arises: What sells the story?

The actual story is the progress of incidents along the strand A, or the chief character. Are these incidents complicating? Are they surprising? Do they in themselves constitute obstacles, points of vivid conflict, curtains of surprise, suspense, or mystery? Do they solve themselves ultimately, through the workings of the web-work lying without? Remember that the plot is not the story. The story is the strand A. If the incidents forming this central strand are interesting, novel, gripping, full of human interest, and essentially dramatic, the story will sell—particularly if every development along strand A is the result of the intersection of A with a uniquely built web-work.

A word as to obstacle, conflict and mystery. I myself have given a great deal of thought to these three great ingredients of "story"—commercial story—the story for the man on the street. Books of technique are strikingly hazy on them all, as they are hazy on everything. They speak in vague generalities. They say roughly that conflict is the basis of plot; that obstacle is the basis of plot; that problem is the basis of plot; that mystery may be the basis of plot. I prefer to look upon plot only as the architecture of the thing. Why not say: Conflict (or obstacle, as the case may be) is the basis of—not plot, but—DRAMATIC INTEREST?

Isn't obstacle in itself conflict—between a person and a condition? Isn't

mystery conflict—a conflict between the human mind and nonunderstandable manifestations?

Now why are the three different in intensity, if they are the same thing; and what is the order of the intensity?

I think you would agree with me, if you went into the little nickel shows on North Clark street, Chicago, and watched the Italians and Greeks stop breathing—heard the intense silence—during the Kalem dramas, that conflict is the strongest SUSPENSE force of the three. The Kalem Company plays this force perilously close to melodrama, and by means of trains makes the time scheme so close that the suspense is terrific. Their formula always includes an unexpected solution of the conflict by a daring feat on the part of Helen. As the conflict grows closer and closer, and either side may perhaps win by a sudden turn of affairs, the coughing over the entire audience will stop as if by magic, and you can hear a pin drop. There's the big test.

In my order of the factors, I place obstacle as the weakest of the three dramatic forces in fiction. Conflict between two actively functioning forces is much stronger on account of the fact that more outcomes are possible. Mystery is hardly comparable with these in the matter of the number of outcomes, on account of the different psychological factor, curiosity, which it involves.

I see no reason for trying to build a story on obstacle, conflict, or mystery alone. Let any one of the three be the piece de resistance of interest, but introduce the other two as well. I have managed to do it in every long story I have written. It is better to have a reinforced dramatic interest than a single one.

As for my working methods: Short-stories are almost always inspiration with me; but web-work serials are made coldly, mathematically. The only part of the web-work that might be the inspiration is the pivotal mystery, obstacle, or struggle. But as a rule, the whole story is built out of thin, blue air. The plot is woven out of nothing. My characters are selected chiefly with the idea in view of securing vivid contrast. I consider the line-up one of the most important things of the plot. Often I change the whole personality, name, occupation, of a character, in order to get that contrast. In the "Crilly Court Mystery," the victim of the murder, in my tentative outline, was in turn a negro, a Jew, an American business man, and finally a Persian curio dealer. Other characters as at first conceived were entirely different from what they are in the story as finally produced.

Of a story that I once wrote for Top-Notch, Mr. Thomas was kind enough to say that they had to stop several times and check up the story, to make sure that I had not gotten lost in my own intricacies and put over a bull on the time scheme. It would be fatal ever to allow an editor to catch you there. My present method is, on every intricate piece of web-work, to draw up a time chart in which every character actively functioning in the plot is accounted for at every moment of the story. Each character is represented by a vertical column, and every quarter of an hour is represented by a horizontal line. On close matters, such as a murder, or something of that sort, I have at times divided down to five minutes, and on "The Michaux Z-Ray" (now having its second run through syndication to the newspapers) I drew the lines as close as ten seconds apart for a period of several minutes, in order not to get lost at the most intricate crossing point. The sheet usually measures several feet in length, and it shows the position of every character at any quarter-hour in the whole time of the story. It gives one a contented feeling that he has the reins well in hand, and all taut.

With this initiation into the methods followed by a successful writer of intricate mystery stories, let us turn to Figure V, which

is a graphic representation of Harry Stephen Keeler's "Crilly Court Mystery," published in Top-Notch Magazine for Sept. 15 and Oct. 1, 15, 1916.

On this graph, each line represents the course of a character through the incidents forming the plot. It will be noted that two of the important individual factors or "characters" are inanimate objects—the picture behind the eyes of which are painted the location of certain incriminating plans, and an exact copy, which does not carry the location of the plans. That is to say, one is a normal painting. Each numbered intersection indicates some kind of an encounter between the two or more characters involved. The unnumbered crossings do not count; they are merely apparent intersections, due to the representation of three-dimensional action on a flat surface. Incidents 5, 25, and 28 show no intersection of lines, but they may be considered as points where the characters came in conflict with outside factors, death, recovery of consciousness, and illness. The heavy line stands for Kentland, the "hero" and viewpoint character. The events are viewed through his eyes, and the reader has no cognizance of what has taken place until Kentland himself learns of it. Thus the opening incident, A, of the actual published story is that numbered 10 in the plot considered as a whole. On the key to the graph, the incidents in the order that they actually take place before the eyes of the reader are lettered A, B, C, D, etc. The unlettered incidents, all of which lie outside of the viewpoint character's progress, it will be noticed, are brought to the reader's attention only indirectly.

Thus, although in point of actual time the murder occurs shortly after midnight (incident 15), Kentland does not receive a hint of it until later, and does not actually discover it until after 3 a. m. (incident 21), when his path crosses that of the murdered man, Mazurka, and the mutilated picture which caused the murder.   *W. E. H.*

To be continued in the July Student-Writer. Be careful to save this number, as the diagrams will be constantly referred to in the succeeding installments.

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